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“The Algernon-Gordon Effect: Experimenting on Society”

Recently, there was an article written in the Journal of Intelligence Studies about a groundbreaking experiment, performed by Professor Nemur. The operation was designed to increase intelligence. The experiment was first performed on a mouse named Algernon and it had very impressive results. Professor Nemur next wanted to try it on a human subject - and he selected Charlie Gordon. Charlie agreed and his sister gave permission. Professor Nemur used the experimental surgical technique on Charlie and the experiment had begun. Within three months, Charlie’s IQ had increased from 68 to 185. It seemed that the experiment was a success. Charlie developed new relationships and learned 20 new languages; things were going well for Charlie. As Charlie’s IQ increased, his relationships with people changed. Some people felt he became arrogant. Meanwhile on the other side of the experiment, Algernon started acting poorly and regressed until the positive effects were gone. Algernon then died. As all of this was happening to Algernon, Charlie found the flaw in Professor Nemur’s experiment which led to Algernon’s regression. Soon after his discovery, Charlie followed in Algernon’s footsteps. Charlie ended up back where he started, with an IQ of 68. Charlie recently passed away.

Following the publication, a second article appeared in the Journal of Bio-Ethics. The article discusses that we always try to improve ourselves and asks: at what point are we going too far? Is it ever right to change a person so profoundly that they become a different person? The writer of this article asks whether a person should be allowed to consent on behalf of someone else in this sort of situation. Other people may not know what the actual person wants, or what is best for him. If another responsible person cannot consent, was it right for Charlie, especially with his level of intelligence, to be asked about being a subject in an experiment? Was it possible for Charlie to understand everything about the experiment? Could Charlie have known the possible side effects or completely understood what was going to happen to him, or would he just have understood the possible positive outcome in a very simple way?

Even if it is ethical to alter the intelligence of a human being, what I’m asking you is if it is a good idea for our society. What are the pros and cons? How does it impact all of us and our society?

First of all, think of a world where there were no more people like Charlie. Our world would completely change and would look very different. Imagine if you had a friend who was mentally challenged and then the next day he was a genius. It would change your relationship completely. Here are some positives for Charlie that came from the operation. He became smart so he wasn’t mentally challenged anymore, and he met new people. But there were negative effects. He lost a lot of friends. He became arrogant and impatient. He lost his kindness, scared away a lot of people, and became unhappy and confused.

Now, keeping some of those negatives and positives in mind, imagine if every disabled person got this operation and became a genius just like Charlie did. Then imagine if *everyone* got the operation. What would be the impact on society? It would be boring, everyone would be the same, no one would do anything differently, and everyone would be evenly matched at everything. Is this the type of world we want? As Charlie became smarter, he started losing friends, he became arrogant, impatient, and self-absorbed. I’m not saying this would definitely happen in every case, but it is just one of the many horrible possibilities.

I am also going to outline some examples of what would happen if everyone underwent the experiment procedure. There would be a lot of different jobs not filled because people would refuse to do jobs that did not interest them or that did not challenge them. Also, imagine if there are, let’s say, eight people trying for a promotion. If they all had the operation, then they would all be equally intelligent and would do the job just as well. So how would you pick who to promote? Would you just pull a name from a hat?

The most compelling consideration is this: What kind of society do we want? – a rich, dynamic, diverse, exciting and caring society where everyone is different? - or one where every single human being is the exact same? If we want a rich society, then aren’t people like Charlie important? They are important because they’re different, and unique and they add value. They may not be smart, but they definitely have gifts that no one else has: trust, joy, and a child’s view in an adult’s body. Many people who knew Charlie would say that knowing him and witnessing the courage he showed during his struggles improved those around him, and developing compassion, understanding and remembering the joy in the simplest things are many of the things that he gave to our society.

These are just few of the many reasons why, for the good and well being of our society, these sorts of experiments should not happen. I will leave you with this: While I was growing up, there was a boy on my street named Sean. He had Fragile X Syndrome which is a mental disability. He was my friend. In the spring, when I would be shooting hoops outside on my driveway, it would never take more than a few minutes for him to come down the street, looking to play with me. Though when we played he wasn’t as coordinated as other kids, he was always very nice. Whether an adult or a child, Sean always brought joy to everyone on the street. If he had the same operation as Charlie, my relationship with him would not have been the same. Sean is one of the nicest people I’ve ever met, and I am better for knowing him, just the way he was.